NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6147 SEPTEMBER 20, 1978
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M-B-F-R: WHAT IT IS, WHERE IT'S GOING

ANNCR:

LATER THIS MONTH (SEPTEMBER 28) NEGOTIATIONS RESUME IN VIENNA TOWARDS MUTUAL AND BALANCED MILITARY FORCE REDUCTIONS IN EUROPE. VOA PENTAGON CORRESPONDENT SEAN KELLY DISCUSSES SOME OF THE PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN REACHING AN AGREEMENT ON M-B-F-R:

VOICE:

IT WILL BE FIVE YEARS SINCE THE NEGOTIATORS FIRST SAT DOWN IN VIENNA AND BEGAN THE ELABORATE PROCESS THAT HAS COME TO BE KNOWN AS M-B-F-R. THEIR OBJECTIVE -- THEN, AS NOW -- HAS BEEN TO REDUCE THE AMOUNT OF MILITARY FIREPOWER THAT NOW CONFRONTS ITSELF ACROSS WHAT USED TO BE CALLED EUROPE'S IRON CURTAIN. ON THE WESTERN SIDE, THERE ARE THE FORCES OF THE NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION; ON THE EASTERN SIDE, THE WARSAW PACT.

IN EFFECT, THE VIENNA NEGOTIATIONS ARE BETWEEN TWO ADVERSARY MILITARY ALLIANCES. EACH SIDE IS DRAWN TO THE CONFERENCE TABLE BY THE PROSPECT OF REDUCING ITS OWN MILITARY BURDEN WITHOUT BESTOWING AN OVERWHELMING ADVANTAGE ON ITS OPPONENT. THE COMPLEXITY OF THE NEGOTIATION IS FURTHER INCREASED BY THE DIFFERING POINTS OF VIEW EXISTING BETWEEN THE COUNTRIES INVOLVED.

NINETEEN NATIONS TAKE PART IN M-B-F-R: BELGIUM, BRITAIN, CANADA, WEST GERMANY, LUXEMBOURG, THE NETHERLANDS AND THE UNITED STATES ON THE NATO SIDE. CZECHOSLOVAKIA, EAST GERMANY, POLAND AND THE SOVIET UNION ARE THE DIRECT PARTICIPANTS ON THE WARSAW PACT SIDE. EIGHT OTHER COUNTRIES PARTICIPATE IN THE NEGOTIATIONS INDIRECTLY. THEY ARE DENMARK, GREECE, ITALY, NORWAY, AND TURKEY FOR THE WEST; AND BULGARIA, HUNGARY AND ROMANIA FOR THE EAST.

ONE OF THE FIRST PROBLEMS THAT AROSE WAS THE TITLE OF THE NEGOTIATIONS. THE WEST PROPOSED M-B-F-R, FOR MUTUAL AND BALANCED FORCE REDUCTIONS. THE EAST OBJECTED TO THE WORD "BALANCED," SAYING THAT IMPLIED THAT THE WARSAW PACT MIGHT HAVE TO MAKE SIGNIFICANTLY LARGER REDUCTIONS THAN THE NATO PARTICIPANTS. THE WEST ULTIMATELY AGREED TO A FORMAL TITLE THAT DID NOT CONTAIN THE WORD "BALANCED", ALTHOUGH THE TALKS HAVE CONTINUED TO BE KNOWN INFORMALLY -- IN THE WEST AT LEAST -- AS M-B-F-R, AND THE QUESTION OF BALANCED REDUCTIONS REMAINS A MAJOR ISSUE IN THE NEGOTIATIONS.

THE NATO SIDE IN THE VIENNA TALKS HAS CONSISTENTLY MAINTAINED THAT THE MOST SIGNIFICANT ASPECT OF AN AGREEMENT WOULD BE THE NUMBER OF FORCES REMAINING AFTER THE REDUCTIONS WERE AGREED UPON -- RATHER THAN THE TOTAL NUMBER OF FORCES TO BE REDUCED. THIS RESULTS FROM THE BELIEF IN THE WEST THAT THE WARSAW PACT ENJOYS CLEAR ADVANTAGES IN GEOGRAPHY, MANPOWER, AND THE STRUCTURE AND EQUIPMENT OF ITS FORCES. THUS THE WEST IS SEEKING APPROXIMATE PARITY AS AN OUTCOME IN THE NEGOTIATIONS.

BUT PARITY, HOWEVER APPROXIMATE, IS HARD TO ACHIEVE WHEN THERE IS NO MUTUAL AGREEMENT ON THE NUMBER OF FORCES ALREADY IN THE AREA. IN SHORT, THE WEST COUNTS MORE TROOPS IN THE WARSAW PACT THAN THE WARSAW PACT IS READY TO ADMIT TO. THIS DISCREPANCY IN NUMBERS -- AMOUNTING TO MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED AND FIFTY THOUSAND TROOPS -- HAS BEEN A SERIOUS STUMBLING BLOCK IN THE VIENNA NEGOTIATIONS, AND IT STILL REMAINS UNRESOLVED.

(OPT) THE RESULTING IMPASSE HAS GIVEN RISE TO THE QUESTION: ARE THE TALKS WORTH CONTINUING? SOME CRITICS HAVE SAID NO, CALLING THE NEGOTIATIONS A WASTE OF TIME. BUT A RECENT BOOK BY FORMER NATO ADVISER WILLIAM PRENDERGAST TAKES A DIFFERENT VIEW.

HE ARGUES THAT THE TALKS REPRESENT "AN IDEA WHOSE TIME CERTAINLY HAS N-O-T YET COME -- BUT MAY ONE DAY. IF IT DOES," SAYS MISTER PRENDERGAST, "HISTORIANS MAY CONCLUDE THAT THE VIENNA NEGOTIATIONS SERVED A USEFUL PURPOSE." (END OPT)

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